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A Stray's Tail

It was such a hot day. The sun, glaring down, seemed likely to parch the last drop of moisture from the leaves. Even in the slight shade cast by some straggly bushes in the centre of the yard, the air felt like a newly opened oven.

A little lizard lay flattened against a branch near the middle of the bush, tail drooping to one side, pointed head drooping to the other, mouth open. His grey-brown coat with the fine, lace-like pattern running down the spine blended with the mottled bark, so that he could barely be seen. Not even the sight of young buzzing flies nearby could move him. Catching flies took energy. Maybe he would be able to work up an appetite when the sun moved further across the sky. Right now, the only thing he wanted was to get out of the heat.

In fact Leli's wish to be cooler was not just idle dreaming. He had his eye on the cool, white-painted concrete house across the yard. He had never been inside a house. And if his mother had her way, neither he nor any of the other young lizards would go near one.

'Our place is in the grass and bushes and trees where nature put us,' she argued. 'We do not build houses. They are not ours by right. Stay away from them!'

Other, older lizards scoffed at such warnings, boasting how many times they had been 'inside'. Some even claimed to have met up with people – the two-legged creatures who made the houses and seemed to go in and out all the time.



And while some warned that many people did not seem to like lizards, others told tales of people who liked lizards and who fed them.

Leli's mouth watered at the thought, as he looked longingly at the house. 'Just look at that deep, cool shade inside, out of the sun,' he thought.

The next day, the sun seemed even fiercer. By the time midday came, Leli could not resist the temptation any longer. He slipped off his branch and ran, in little spurts, from limb to limb, until he reached the ground. Once there, he lay still, looking around for possible enemies. But even the cats seemed to be looking for some shade somewhere. So he started a dash across the middle of the yard from the house.

Halfway there, he heard a scurrying that set his tiny heart pounding like the waves on a beach in the late afternoon. Stopping suddenly, he hid behind a clump of grass, letting his small body cling to the ground, and twining his long tail through the stalks, while trying to quieten his heartbeat.

The scurrying sound came on, and Leli was both relieved and scared when he saw another lizard come into sight. He was relieved because it was a lizard, and not some other creature that might mistake him for food. But he was scared too, because there, staring at him, was a ground lizard – one of the biggest and fiercest of his cousins.

The big lizard stretched its dull green body, flattening its long tail against the ground, and reared its slim head as it looked at the young tree lizard cowering before it. A long moment passed before Leli realized that the expression was one of astonishment, rather than anger. So he decided to take a chance, 'Excuse me, Sir,' he squeaked, his voice barely shivering up out of his throat, then he slowly wriggled out from the clump of grass and scuttled away.

For some moments, he half expected to hear movement behind him, and to feel a strong forefoot knock him senseless. But he heard nothing, and when he gathered up the courage to look back, the ground lizard was invisible in the grass.

So Leli ran on towards the house and finally stopped, panting, by the bottom of the wall. He looked up at the high, bare, white surface that he would have to climb before reaching the window where he had seen the deep, cool shadow, and his heart quailed. But the sun was still beating down without mercy, and Leli knew that he could not stay where he was.

He must either climb the wall and dare to enter the house, or return home tamely. To the little lizard, that was no choice at all.

He looked around once more and saw something that convinced him he must act at once: a skinny, ginger cat was making its way around the corner of the house.